

Engaging the Enemy

The Wild Randalls – Book 1

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CHAPTER ONE

NO MATTER HOW much time had passed since his last visit to Hampshire, Leopold Randall, heir to the young Duke of Romsey's title, would rather return to exile in India than beg help from Romsey Abbey. If not for his quest to locate his family, Leopold would never have set foot on Romsey soil again.

He stared across the mist shrouded valley to where Romsey Abbey, a sprawling mish mash of architectural foolishness, glowed boldly in the early morning light with a growing sense of foreboding. All his life he had gazed at the place that had been the home of his ancestors and wished he might have been born into another family.

The stench of betrayal lay thick upon Romsey Abbey. Even when the duke in question was too young to understand the power he would wield one day, his existence was far from innocent, steeped in lies. Born and bound in deceit. The Romsey duke's crushed those that stood in their way without a passing thought for the pain they would inflict. Leopold's side of the family had suffered such a fate, scattered to the four corners.

Leopold had been denied any return to England in the past five years. His existence considered both a threat and a commodity for the old duke's schemes. The last time he had been summoned into His Grace's presence, Leopold had made a bargain with the old devil to keep his sister safe. Even if he'd not had any choice in the matter, the memory of that night still haunted his dreams and robbed him of any peace.

Behind him, in humble whitewashed cottages, the sleepy village came to life. They were happy, secure in their lives, confident in the benevolence of the Duke of Romsey, and the continuation of years of endless tradition, pomp and ceremony. Going about their days with no idea of the ugly, calculating power of the family he was sadly a part of.

Leopold slipped a pistol into his hand, finding reassurance in the familiar weight, and then let it go in disgust. Three months ago he'd been sweltering in Surat on the banks of the Tapti River, unaware of the changes at Romsey, going about the old

duke's business with no idea he was free. The news he had died a year and a half ago had pleased him. But it was only by chance that he'd heard the duke's only son, his cousin Edwin Randall, had died six months after acceding to the title. To say he was shocked was an understatement. Now, only a child stood between him and gaining the title of the Duke of Romsey.

Somewhere in the depths of hell, the old Duke of Romsey must be writhing in agony.

Many men might covet such a situation, but Leopold was free and, if he lived a quiet life now he'd returned to England, he may never have to bow to the current duke's demands again. The idea had been gratifying—intensely so. He could go where ever he chose without having to account for his actions. Freedom after a decade of servitude was sweet. It had taken him a very short amount of time to wrap up his affairs, set aside his mistress, and return home on the first available ship. Not even a run-in with a marauding American privateer had dimmed his enthusiasm.

His heady sense of excitement had lasted until his feet touched English cobblestones in Portsmouth. Hearing so many English voices at once had overwhelmed him momentarily, but a single voice—clear and insistent—had turned him about in his tracks. A girl called out to a young lad named Toby. His missing brother's name was Tobias.

But it hadn't been his brother, just a street scamp dodging his pursuers. But at that moment he'd reaffirmed his purpose in coming home. Come hell or high water, he would put his missing family back together. He would search the globe if necessary to find out what the old Duke of Romsey had done with Oliver, Rosemary, and Tobias. His younger brothers and sister had been taken from him by force. Only Leopold had been granted a limited liberty, forced to dance to the old duke's tune in order to keep them safe.

Unfortunately, information was hard to uncover. He had spent weeks in London, engaging a private investigator to discreetly question staff at the ducal mansion and the man of business with the hopes of hearing of their fate. He was informed the London mansion had been closed since the old duke's death a year and a half ago. The current duchess, his cousin's wife, widowed a year ago, was mired in the country with her son and had no plans to come to town that anyone knew of. The man of business was new and clueless about the past, or his side of the Randall family. Aside from striking up a careful friendship with Viscount Carrington in London, a man an old friend had vouched for but with too many problems of his own to be of help, he'd had no choice but to grudgingly return home to Hampshire and beg for information himself.

Now, he had no idea what future lay before him, but his audience today would set the wheels in motion for the rest of his life. He would get his answers and be done with Romsey once and for all.

"Your breakfast is ready, Mr. Randall," the innkeeper called. "Same room as last night."

"Thank you, Brown." Leopold turned from the view and graced the innkeeper with a smile reminiscent of his former life before his exile. The man need not have any reason to question his motives for returning. He need not see how bitter

Leopold had become. “How is your daughter faring these days?”

“Very well, sir. She’s got three young ones now and another on the way. Her husband comes home irregular from sea and refills her belly at each visit.”

Leopold smiled but made no further comment. He’d only asked to be polite. The former Fanny Brown had been the local tart. Tender hearted, but a tart just the same.

“If you don’t mind me saying so, sir, it sure is good to see another Randall in the district. The place has been far too quiet since your family left.” Brown touched his cap and hurried away. “The Duchess of Romsey will be pleased to see you, he called.”

But anger swirled through Leopold like a rising tide and he hesitated to follow. He had to work hard to force his bitterness away. Left? His family had not left of their own volition. His parents had likely been killed on the duke’s order, his siblings abducted certainly. But until he had proof of their whereabouts, he’d keep his eyes open. Until he’d met the current Duchess of Romsey and determined how big a threat she was to his family’s survival, he’d do well to distrust anything she said or did.

With one last glance at the distant abbey, he turned toward the inn and the warmth of his breakfast. The private dining chamber was so familiar, so unchanged during his absence that he expected to hear his family laughing around the battered table over a meal. He shook off the memory—it did no good to dwell on happier times—and wearily sank into a chair.

Leopold spooned food into his mouth mechanically, offering a smile to the shy innkeeper’s wife as she added fresh rolls to the table. But his mind was on the frustrating question of where his family had been taken and, more importantly, what kind of life they were living now that the old duke was dead. Despite his promises, there was always the danger that Romsey had lied from the start and disposed of them ten years ago. He shook his head. He could not think too much about that possibility. That way led to the same panic he’d experienced a decade ago when he’d discovered Oliver had disappeared overnight.

Would Oliver still be calculating the odds of every conceivable circumstance? Would Rosemary still be ordering everyone about as if she was a duchess and driving young men to distraction? No doubt Tobias would still be knee deep in trouble, hopefully nothing that Leopold couldn’t get him out of. Despite the old duke’s tight noose around his life, Leopold had made his fortune in India and had the satisfaction of being able to buy almost anything he wanted now. But all he required was his family back where he could see them every day, where he could return to a life where he’d been a happy and content man.

Sadly, he could barely remember those days.

Wishing for a miracle hadn’t helped him so far. Only time and determination would get him where he wanted to go. And that was as far away as possible from Romsey.

Leopold threw some coins onto the table and strode out to the stables. His valet, Miles Colby, awaited him, their two mounts saddled and ready in the yard.

The cheeky fellow bowed deferentially, as if he did so every day. “Are we still to look about this morning, sir?”

“Yes, it cannot hurt to refresh my memory of the land.” Leopold ignored Colby’s behavior, it really was better than asking him to stop yet again, and swung up into the saddle. His valet had taken the news of him being connected with the Duke of Romsey, of being next in line for the title, far better than Leopold had done. Colby had tried, unsuccessfully, to have Leopold turned out in a style befitting a duke’s heir while they had been in London. But Leopold had resisted. He was content enough as he was and had no need to gild the lily since he very much doubted he would live to inherit anything. The current duke was young, but he might manage to live longer than his father and spare Leopold of the unwanted responsibility.

He urged his horse out into the lane at a trot. He’d not told Colby outright that he was refreshing his memory in case he was pursued. Colby would be all right should the duchess prove to be dangerous. In Leopold’s experience, the Duke’s and Duchess’ of Romsey considered outsiders, someone without Randall blood, useful indulgences—not potential threats. At least, not at first glance.

Familiar vistas greeted him as they made their way to the estate entrance, but from the outset it was apparent that all was not right with Romsey. The road was deeply rutted in places and when he glanced into the empty fields, he could see that the lower lake’s eastern shore had choked with withered reeds. The old duke would never have allowed lapses like that to occur, not in his lifetime anyway.

All about him, Romsey suffered from the lack of rain as the rest of England seemed to do. The upper dams should have been breached earlier to feed the lower streams to ensure the harvest was a good one this year. What he saw hinted that the estate did not prosper. Leopold’s chest tightened with a mix of gladness and regret at the other signs of decay. As much as he hated the duke’s, Romsey was home. The memory of cool, lush green fields had sustained him in sticky, sweltering India. What lay about him soured his return.

A woman screamed. “Get your hands off him!”

Leopold twisted in the saddle, searching for the feminine voice raised so furiously in alarm. In the distance, further along the lane, stood a shabby thatched cottage where a tall man held a child captive in his arms. At his feet, a woman beat ineffectually for the boy’s release.

Leopold kicked his horse forward. “What the hell is going on here?”

Both man and woman turned. Beth Turner—garbed much more poorly than he remembered—gasped in surprise and then ran to him. “Sir, he’s trying to take my George away with him.”

Like hell they would! Leopold swung from the saddle and sidestepped the distraught mother. “Let George Turner go. Now.”

The other man, a rough looking brute, scowled at the interruption. “Stay out of my business and be on your way.”

The Turner’s welfare was very much his business. Leopold withdrew his weapon and pointed it at the man’s head. “What happens here is my business. You are on Romsey land. We rule here.”

“You ‘ain’t the duke. He’s but a child. Besides, the woman can’t pay. He’ll work off her debt eventually.”

Behind Leopold, Colby was attempting to reassure the distraught mother, but

Beth Turner had a full head of steam up and wasn't about to be silent. "You imbecile. Don't you know who stands before you?"

The man blinked. "He 'ain't anyone important. Just some gent come ta sniff 'round your skirts."

Beth laughed nervously. "You're blind."

Leopold waited, patience wearing thin. "Let go of the child and be on your way before I put a ball in you."

"Listen. I got orders. She can't pay so I'm to take the child in place of payment."

"How much?"

The debt collector licked his lips. "Ten pounds, it is."

Beth Turner shrieked at the sum named. Obviously, this debt collector attempted to line his own pockets and considered him a gullible cull.

Leopold debated his options. He could stare the man down, but then he'd waste precious time. Besides, the man could probably use the money. Judging by his shabby attire, debt collecting didn't pay well. Or he just wasn't very good at it. "Colby. Ten pounds. Now."

Behind him, his valet rushed for the horses and Leopold could hear him digging around in his saddlebag. The debt collector's eyes widened and the child slipped from his grip. Once released, the boy rushed for his mother.

Paper pressed into Leopold's palm and he lowered the weapon. He held out the notes. "I will expect no further demands to be made of the Turner's. Come to me in future."

The brute lumbered forward to retrieve the money and tucked it into his pocket. "I would if I had your name, sir."

"Leopold Randall."

The debt collector paled and took two steps back.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Randall. I didn't recognize you."

"Quite. Be on your way."

The other man turned, dragged himself into his rough cart, and set off down the lane at a fast clip. Once he had disappeared from view, Leopold turned to look at the cottage.

The Turner's had been a moderately prosperous family, but it appeared they had fallen on hard times in his absence. They hadn't lived in this shabby place before. Their last place had a prettier outlook. William Turner, a man with a well-known temper and pride to match, would be furious when he found out what had just transpired between his wife and the debt collector. He turned to Beth.

The once pretty woman appeared neatly dressed, but closer inspection revealed careful darning on the sleeve and a tattered hem dragging on the dry road. Her expression was one of exhaustion and embarrassment as she clutched her son to her with every appearance of never letting go. "William always said you would come back when the duke died, but I never believed him," she whispered.

He smiled. "Of course I returned. I have unfinished business at the abbey." Leopold glanced around. "When will William return?"

The boy made to speak, but his mother shushed him by pushing him toward the cottage. "William's gone, Mr. Randall. He died the spring before last."

Leopold rocked on his heels, shocked at the news. He glanced around the

cottage again, noting the disrepair, the signs that the man of the house was long gone. A feeble curl of smoke drifted from the chimney of a roof that needed re-thatching. The gardens were wild with neglect, too. He couldn't believe William was gone, but the proof was before his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Beth. I hadn't heard of his passing."

"Why would you?"

The awkward silence stretched between them. Leopold had counted on William's presence to make his return bearable. Without him, there would be no reason to dwell in the memory of happier times. He'd get what he came for and leave as soon as he could. And if there was trouble, he'd battle his way out alone.

"Will you come in, sir?"

Beth Turner's formality grated on his nerves. Although William had been his friend since childhood, Beth had remained in awe of his familial connections since her marriage. She refused to behave any other way, even if his chance of acceding to the ducal title was slim. Resigned that little had changed between them, Leopold allowed her to lead the way into the cottage. She hurried to bring order to the cramped space, hiding scuffed shoes and pails set at random about the bare floors.

Eventually, Beth dragged a frayed shawl from the chair by the hearth and motioned for him to sit in William's former chair. Leopold took up his usual seat, on a three legged stool, on the other side of the fire.

Gingerly, Beth sat in William's place. "If I may ask, what brings you back to us now after so long, Mr. Randall?"

"Family business, Beth. But I had intended to see William. How did he die?"

Beth tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and then rubbed her palms over her knees. "Poacher's shot caught him in the thigh when he was gathering wood. Sawbones couldn't save him."

Appalled by her toneless statement, Leopold sat forward. "I'm very sorry, Beth. He was the best of men. I had intended to offer him a position now that I've returned to England for good. I wanted to bring you all with me to a better place."

Beth shrugged and glanced over at her boy. "All I've got is my George now. We do all right here."

"He looks to be a sturdy lad. Quite the image of his father at that age."

The boy, laboring at his chores on the other side of the room, straightened his shoulders. Leopold bit back a smile. A little encouragement was all it took to make a boy see his future as a man. William Turner's child would grow to be an honorable, proud man if given the chance. But not in this place as it was now. Leopold looked around him again, noticing the absence of small things that had come into the family upon William's marriage to Beth. The delicate rosewood table and chairs he'd teased William about were gone. So too were the carpets. He worked to keep his face clear of emotion. They had fallen far in his absence, but getting distressed over the matter would solve nothing.

Leopold stood. "I will take my leave of you now. But I will want to hear if you have any more trouble. Be sure to send word to me."

Beth scrubbed her hands over her knees again, a sure sign his request troubled her. "Where exactly are you staying?"

"The Vulture." He'd not be welcome at the abbey beyond an hour, and most

certainly never asked to stay so he might have the chance to decline graciously. The village inn was preferable to anywhere else. "I'll expect to hear from you if there is trouble again."

Beth Turner's shoulders relaxed.

Leopold nodded then stepped out into the yard with Colby hurrying in his wake. At the horses, he set his foot into the stirrup with a heavy heart. "Make it right, Colby." He swung into the saddle. "Food on the table for tonight, speak to Brown about fixing the roof, and see to it that the boy and mother are properly prepared for the coming winter. Tell Brown I'll settle funds on him this evening to cover every expense required. Once I have matters settled at the abbey, I'll make arrangements for their future."

Colby's eyes widened with surprise, but he wisely nodded and directed his horse back toward the village. As much as Leopold didn't want the responsibility here at Romsey, he wouldn't turn his back on William's widow and son. He would see she had the protection of the Randall family, even if it was from the disreputable side.

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